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“Paganism and Its Others”, Notes from the Conference

STANISLAV GUBANČOK

The conference “Paganism and Its Others” was held on the 13th and 14th of June 2022 at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University in Brno. It was organised by Miroslav Vrzal, Matouš Vencálek, and Ivona Vrzalová, members of the Department of Religious Studies, who also presented their papers. The conference comprised a selection of interdisciplinary approaches to a wide range of topics. The participants heard presentations from religious, anthropological, historical, and sociological perspectives from researchers and students from across the whole world. Since Covid-19 pandemic, many academic activities have been organized online. This particular conference had a hybrid nature, including both in-person and on-line parts. As someone with expertise in only some of the themes discussed, I present here my personal highlights.

After a welcome speech by the organisers to open the conference, the first keynote speaker, Michael Francis Strmiska, an Associate Professor in World History at Orange County Community College, presented a paper dealing with a methodological approach to the research of contemporary paganism as a religion. During the presentation, he discussed its universalist and particularistic conception, and described the neopagan movement in Lithuania known as Romuva, established by Jonas Trinkūnas (1939-2014), who invited him to speak at the World Congress of Ethnic Religions in 1998. The main topic of Strmiska’s speech was problem of violence and hatred presented towards the Neo-pagans from the side of Christianity or Islam. Another interesting aspect of this topic was the differentiation between the words “pagan/paganism” and “ethnic religion”.

The second speaker was Michal Puchovský, whose presentation dealt with Slovak neofolk and neopagan groups with a particular focus on the phenomenon of Žiarislav. Puchovský described music’s role in forming neopagan youth groups and in attracting people to pagan revivalist movements. During his ethnographical research, the author attended Žiarislav rituals and his conclusions detail the role of music in the community – in



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particular, the role of Žiarišlav's music – and the spreading of nonconformist ideas. Though I am well acquainted with this topic, Puchovský still brought some interesting new insights and perspectives.

The third speaker of the day was Miroslav Vrzal from Masaryk University, and those interested in Metal Studies, a new study field in the Czech and Slovak regions, will already know his work.¹ His paper was dedicated to the underground metal music scene in the Czech Republic represented by various groups. Pagan themes first appeared (especially) among black metal groups around the early 90s and bands such as Trollech and Inferno constructed their identity as a form of opposition to Christianity, which they perceived as hostile. At the end of the presentation, Vrzal also mentioned the Czech and Slovak black metal communities, which have supported Ukraine in its war against Russia by means of organising beneficial concerts.

Following in a similar vein, and using illustrative and visual content, Matouš Vencálek's interesting presentation, "Kolovrat and Kalashnikov: The Role of Paganism in the War in Ukraine", examined the phenomenon of neopagan warriors participating in the current conflict in Ukraine. Vencálek described how pagans are fighting on both sides and are members of various battalions using pre-Christian or neopagan symbolics – for example, the Ukrainian Azov battalion or the Russian Rusič battalion. After the presentation, a short discussion was initiated about the influence of paganism amongst combatants, and whether pagans on opposite sides of a conflict would fight should they meet in different circumstances.

The first online presentation of the day, "Neo-pagan warrior of Ukraine: Theory and Practice", was given by Oksana Smorzhevskaja, from the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, and examined the difference between understanding and recognising pagan "movement philosophy" in Ukraine and Western Europe in the ongoing war. Ukrainians who identify themselves as Neo-pagans with values extolling military honour and prowess find themselves in the role of defenders of the nation in times of conflict. At the end of the presentation, Smorzhevskaja presented names and photos of neo-pagan warriors who have already fallen in battle.

The following presentation by Ross Downing from King's College, "Weaponizing Odin: Russian State Interference in Far-Right Heathenry", was dedicated to the issue of far-right and neo-paganism. He presented the

1 Miroslav Vrzal is the founder of Czech Metal Studies and an organizer of the conference Metal studies in Central/Eastern Europe. (Jana Nenadalová – Tereza Menšíková, "'Metal studies in Central/Eastern Europe: 1st (online) workshop' on Extreme Music and its Academic Studies", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 30/1, 2022, 77-80.) An overview is available online: <https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/bitstream/handle/11222.digilib/145002/2_Religio_30-2022-1_8.pdf?sequence=1>.

case study of a terrorist act in Sweden conducted by three members of the Nordic Resistance Movement, who received paramilitary training in Russia. The founder of the group and trainer of the three men was charged with political coordination of the pro-Russian separatist movement in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The group also trained German and Syrian national socialists. Downing's paper was aimed mainly at the modern discourse on the backgrounds of extremist religious movements, of which neo-paganism is also a one, as well as on the role of neopaganism in the information war.

Anita Stasulane from Daugavpils University also presented a topic dealing with far-right themes. Her online presentation was titled "Paganism and the Radical Right: A Historical Insight on the Dievturi Movement", and, for academics and audiences who were not acquainted with the Baltic neo-pagan movement, her presentation was an engaging introduction to the topic. The Latvian neo-pagan movement bears the name Dievturība and its origins are closely connected with the search for a Latvian national identity and the founding of the first republic in 1918.

The next presentation was of my own, which concerned historical sources on ancient Baltic tribes of Lithuania and opened with a question about early medieval sources on pre-Christian religion: Can we consider authors of chronicles and the producers of fragmentary texts such as merchants and travelers as the first pre-ethnographers? Every early medieval or just medieval source on Baltic pagans is "from the other side of the barricade" – they are not written by pagans. The main question is whether we can trust such authors. Were they honest, did they make mistakes, or did they provide false information? The answer is ambiguous; we must always consider the individual circumstances of the time when the source was written, by whom, and why it was written. A very good example is one of the earliest sources about Baltic Prussians from Helmold of Bosau. Helmold wrote about the nature and character of people who were (from his point of view) Slavs – now we know, however, that he was writing about Prussians, who were one of the Baltic tribes. Nevertheless, he described these people with the information that was available to him at the time.

The following panel was dedicated mostly to Baltic themes. The speaker was Jūratė Rzeznik, an independent researcher from the USA, who presented the topic "Challenges of Building an Ethnic Faith Community in the Diaspora". Rzeznik is active in the North American Romuva movement and she described the problems faced by a growing community with such a specific ethnic background. One of the problems often confronting ethnic faith communities is the language used during celebrations and rituals. The Lithuanian language is one of the most difficult languages in Europe to learn and thus newcomers who are not native speakers of the

language face difficulties with regard to participating fully in Romuva community life.

The series of online presentations continued with another interesting topic concerning the Baltic region, presented by Uģis Nastevičs from the University of Latvia. It connected to the topic of Anīta Stasuliene about the beginning of Dievturi in Latvia in the early 20th century (the first independence of Latvia), under foreign occupation (1940-1941 by USSR, 1941-1943 by Nazi Germany), and in the contemporary era of the restored republic. Nastevičs outlined the Latvian effort to revive the old pagan heritage of ancient Baltic tribes, which, in the 20th century, was often romanticized by the national revival.

The next presentation was again dedicated to the Lithuanian neo-pagan movement known as Romuva. Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson from Vilnius University presented the paper “The Process of State Recognition of the Old Baltic Faith Romuva Movement”, which is a current topic in Lithuania, but barely discussed in the countries of central Europe. The author presented the whole problem, from the Romuva movement’s attempt to have the Romuva faith recognized as an official religion, up to when the European Court of Human Rights upheld a complaint that the rejection of the movement’s request was unfair. After the presentation, questions were raised about the current state of the application in Lithuania, which remains denied by the Lithuanian Seimas.²

After a coffee break, there were two more panels. Manca Račič, a PhD candidate from the University of Ljubljana, presented his paper “Staroverstvo in Slovenia and its Internal Others”. Račič described the main figure of the neo-pagan movement, Pavel Medvešček-Klančar (1933-2022), who was the author of publications about *staroverstvo*.³ In our context, we could compare him to the Slovak leader Žiarislav, who was the main topic of Michal Puchovský’s presentation. Medvešček-Klančar and Žiarislav are both authors of publications about neo-pagan revival movements and both use their own terminology. In general, the legacy of such spiritual leaders and their influence on post-modern spirituality and neo-pagan movements is an important topic in need of elucidation. In addition, comparisons between various movements and their influence on individual religiosity would be a very fruitful avenue for future research.

2 Jonas Vaiškūnas, „Seimas nepakluso Strasbūro teismui – nesuteikė Romuvai valstybės pripažinimo PAPILDYTA“ [online], Alkas.lt, 29. 9. 2022, <https://alkas.lt/2022/09/29/seimas-nepakluso-strasburo-teismui-nesuteike-romuvai-valstybes-pripazinimo-bus-papildyta/?fbclid=IwAR2utJuqGpvNku01OUoTMJcfbnM3U8_c0S5sBTOcpBm77ESe9_ByF7Opvs>, [30. 1. 2023].

3 The Slovenian word *staroverstvo* would in literal translation be *old faith*. In some cases, it might be confused with the orthodox sect of old believers.

Jedidja van Boven from the University of Groningen, currently at Jagiellonian University, presented a paper titled “Gods and Goddesses in the Low Countries: Contemporary Paganism and the European Religious Identity Crisis”. Her presentation was aimed at the main research question: How do Dutch contemporary pagans experience processes of religious change, most notably secularization and its associated phenomena? The question and the case study were set up in the context of Dutch society and culture, where traditional Protestant institutions are in decline.

Muhammad Amirul Haqqi from the University of Szeged presented the topic of his Master’s thesis “LGBTQ+ Wicca Flexible Interpretation and Question of Inclusivity”. Wicca as a modern religious movement refers to the Celtic tradition combined with modern elements. Haqqi’s hypothesis was based on the idea that members of the LGBTQ+ community who are also Wicca practitioners can reinterpret the binary gender of the divinity. The research was conducted in the city of Budapest among several Wiccan groups.

Giuseppe Maiello from the University of Finance and Administration closed the first day of the conference with his paper “Considerations of the Members of a Czech Contemporary Pagan community on a Pagan Transgender man”. Maiello talked about the famous transgender figure of the American neo-pagan community Raven Kaldera. His presentation dealt with interviews about reactions among the community to transgender people.

The second day began with a keynote presentation by Scott Simpson titled “From a Global Perspective, Can We Talk About ‘Contemporary Paganism’ yet?” Scott Simpson is a lecturer at Jagiellonian University in Cracow and his research interests include contemporary paganism in Central Europe and sociology as well as the history of eating. He began with definitional issues relating to the neo-pagan movement. Later, he asked whether we could already talk about pagan studies and share the fact that contemporary paganism is an integral part of academic studies.

Further to this, he ran through the many pagan studies programmes across the world and ended with an “action plan for a global concept of pagan studies” in order to suggest divisions and topics worthy of research.

Natalie Mathews from Massey University presented the topic “The shallowness of youth: metaphor in the construction of Pagan ‘other’ in the early 21st century” connected to post-modern witchcraft and the problems of “witches and magic through the internet and social sites.”

Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen, an independent scholar, presented his Doctoral thesis, published in 2019. “Finfara; Interacting with the Other as a Way to Recover Traditional Religiosity, the Afro-Nordic Example” describes Finfara as a strategy of recovery of traditional polytheism in western

world. Author states that Afro-Diasporic religions are resilient for domination of modern concepts of knowledge and can become a certain resource for revitalization of traditional religiosity.

Pavel Horák from the Czech Academy of Sciences presented his paper “Christianity and Paganism: On a Statue and its Shadow” from the perspective of reconsidering narratives about modern paganism as a doctrine-free religion based on Margot Adler’s theory, who was an American journalist and popular Neo-pagan practitioner. According to Horák, “[g]enerally, doctrines serve as authoritatively-defined theoretical components of religion, comprising teaching, beliefs, and confessions. Using symbolic language: Christianity is the statue, and Paganism is the shadow it casts. Hence, we can only understand ancient and modern Paganism if we understand Christianity since they are intrinsically bound”. His presentation was inspirational and included much to think and talk about later. From a historical perspective, it seems clear that without understanding Christian historical sources, we cannot understand historical paganism; and, from this point of view, Horák is right.

After a lunch break, Abhiraman Poonaram Kuzhiyil from the University of Hyderabad presented the topic “The Lotus Cross: Hindu-Christian Interactions in the Southern Indian State of Kerala”, this informing the audience of many new and interesting facts about the state of Kerala, which is situated on the southwestern coast of India and home to both Christians, who call themselves Saint Thomas Christians, and native Hindu pagans. The paper described the relationship between these two religious groups and their syncretism.

Gadi Jarken from Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics was the second speaker that day to open a topic from an Indian perspective. His paper, “Religious beliefs among the Galo tribe: Changes & Continuity”, described the Galo tribe from Arunachal Pradesh in Northeastern India, a group which is located in the Himalayan Mountains and has its own language and religious ideas of Donyi Polo and Christianity. Overall, this topic was an engaging ethnographic-religious excursion for those of us who are not so familiar with the ethnography of India.

Tomáš Kubisa from the Slovak Academy of Sciences presented his paper “Vedic Slavism in Slovakia. Truly Paganism?”, based on his doctoral thesis. Vedic Slavism is a new phenomenon which appeared in Slovakia about twelve to fifteen years ago, and Kubisa, having actively attended its rituals, described its community in detail and presented new and interesting information. In particular, he outlined the existence of two branches of this movement in Slovakia, which are defined by their origin as Russian or Ukrainian, this creating a problem for Slavic Neo-pagan followers who, in light of the Russo-Ukraine war, do not wish to be associated with Vedic

Slavism due to its strong ideological orientation towards the Russian Federation.

In her presentation “From Catholicism to Paganism – some insights on the conversion of Polish Pagans”, Joanna Malita-Król from Jagiellonian University discussed the topic of how people become pagans. Poland as a country with a strong Roman Catholic tradition is also a place where Slavic Native Faith or other Neo-pagan movements have grown in the past decade. Malita-Król analyzed where new members of various pagan groups (Slavic Native Faith, druids, Wiccans) come from, their pathway from the rejection of Catholicism, and their conversion narratives.

The syncretism of Christianity and pre-Christian beliefs is strong in most of Europe, existing since medieval times and in some parts of Europe even longer. The next presentation by Robert-Catalin Barbu from the University of Northampton, “Ritual and Orthodox Religion, a Short Introduction of Their Relation in Romanian Context. Funerary Rites and Magic Charm Ritual, as Two Short Case Studies”, was both a summary and an example of how pre-Christian faith was conserved in folk rituals and the everyday life of people. The coexistence of Christianity and pagan beliefs was also encapsulated by Mircea Eliade’s term “Cosmic Christianity”. To understand better the way in which they have interacted and the nature of their relationship, Barbu presented two short case studies of rituals, which, unfortunately, were rather rushed due to time constraints. Many, I’m sure, would definitely be interested in pursuing the topic further.

Iceland, as a country with a positive attitude towards the Neo-pagan movement, boasts a registered Asatru community. In his presentation “An Atypical Base-community in Past 50 years: Research Findings and Corrected Perspectives for the Icelandic Ásatrúarfélagið”, Márk Nemes from the University of Szeged presented an overview of the academic study of this religious phenomenon.

In his perhaps provocatively titled paper “Native Faith, The Bastard Sister of Anthropology?” (incorporating a phrase borrowed from the well-known ethnologist and anthropologist James Frazer), the anthropologist Mariusz Filip from Adam Mickiewicz University explored the relationship between anthropology as a science and modern paganism in the Polish milieu. He examined the case of the Polish ethnographer, historian, and Slavophile of the 19th century, Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski, who strongly influenced the science of his period and whose works Neo-pagan movements in Poland took as a source of inspiration. As we can read in Filip’s abstract: “Yet despite all hierarchical differences between science and magic/religion, new points of convergence do appear: some ethnographers and other scholars engage in the development of contemporary Pagan

movements, Pagans pursue some of their views in the field of science in numerous ways.” In a similar vein, the Slovak writer Sebastián Jahič has recently described the problematics of the reconstruction of native faith by Neo-pagan movements and their search for religiosity in historical and ethnographical facts.⁴

A student of religious studies, Jakub Jahl from Charles University presented his paper “Comparison of Pagan and Satanic Festivities”, a title which was potentially ambiguous, as the word “pagan” could refer to the historical pre-Christian religion or to contemporary paganism. In addition, the word “pagan” could also subsume the concept of anti-identity – that is, an identity in opposition to Christianity – which is present both in the Neo-pagan community and among Satanists, and could also be a feature of festivities. In this respect, an interesting work is *Satanizmus v 21. storočí* by the Slovak writer Jahič.⁵

Malcolm J. Brenner, a journalist, presented a paper about the Navajo, a Native American tribe which is very well known thanks to the famous American historical movie *Code Navajo*. The title of his presentation was “A Witch Among the Navajos: 8 Years on the Big Rez.”

Overall, the whole conference proceeded smoothly, thanks to the excellent and professional organization by the team from the the Department for the Study of Religions. The wide ranging themes were expertly divided up into related topics to provide engaging and thought-provoking panels and discussions, and the hybrid online/in-person platform was a new and refreshing approach that could be used in the future to attract a wide variety of interesting guests and keynote speakers.

4 Sebastián Jahič, „Novopohanstvo: Rekonštrukcionizmus, alebo živý mýtus? Časť prvá“ [online], *Pohanský kruh*, 19. 1. 2022, <<https://pohanskykruh.wordpress.com/2022/01/19/novopohanstvo-rekonstrukcionizmus-alebo-zivy-mytus-cast-prva/>>, [9. 11. 2022].

5 Sebastián Jahič, *Satanizmus v 21. storočí*, Sol Noctis: Zvolen 2020. Overview by Miroslav Vrzal [online], <<https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/en/handle/11222.digilib/digilib.77102>>.